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AUTHOR Pesavento, Wilma J.
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ABSTRACT

This is a report on the motives of North American Indians in holding their athletic games. Data were researched from "Annual Reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology" published between 1881 and 1933. Anthropologists, artifact collectors, artist-writers, and historians provided primary evidential sources for athletic game motivation. Included were the major North American Indian games of archery, snowsnakes, hoop and pole, racket, shinny, and doubleball. Five general motives resulted from the research. They were gambling, amusement-diversion, ceremonial observance, increase of physical powers, and development of moral attributes. The data indicated that gambling, the wagering of stakes or game implements, was a highly significant motive of the North American Indians for holding all athletic games. All other motives were of minor or insignificant importance. (Author/RC)

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MOTIVATIONS OF NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS IN ATHLETIC GAMES

The playing of games seems to be a common if not universal trait in historic cultures. Beginning in earlier centuries, scholars and researchers have investigated and reported the games, especially athletic games, of past cultures and have built up a body of knowledge concerning those cultures and games.

Interest in the American Indian is of more recent vintage. As the sports historian is concerned with the motives for participation in athletic games in antiquity and in the more recent past, so too is he concerned with the motives of the North American Indian for playing athletic games.

Problem

The problem under investigation concerned itself with ascertaining the motives of the North American Indians in holding their athletic games. The primary problem had two sub-problems. One concerned the possible linkage of individual games with specific motives. That is, did specific motives tend to relate to specific games? The second sub-problem involved the manifestation of the motive in the culture--the manner in which the motive displayed itself.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations inherent in the study.

(1) Recognizing that North American Indian games included both games of chance and games of athletic skill, this study was restricted to athletic game motivation.

(2) Athletic games that were included for study were limited to the games of archery, doubleball, hoop and pole, racket, shinny, and snowsnake.

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(3) The source of collected data was limited to accounts appearing in the annual reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology.

(4) The assessment of motive was limited to motive verifying statements by the authors of the early accounts utilized as source material.

Procedure and Definitions

Data for this investigation were researched from all annual reports of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution. These forty-eight Annual Reports were published from 1881 to 1933. Ethnologists, artifact collectors, artist-writers, and historians, whose observations were included in the Annual Reports, provided primary evidential sources for obtaining author-stated motives of various Indian tribes for athletic games. The Annual Reports produced ninety-nine (99) motive verifying statements for North American Indian athletic games.

Those athletic games of the North American Indian included in this investigation comprise games not all popularly known; the essence of these games follows:

(1) Archery. A game played with arrows, darts, or analogous objects which are shot or tossed at a target.

(2) Doubleball. A game in which two balls tied together are tossed with a stick toward a goal.

(3) Hoop and Pole. A game of throwing a pole at a moving target consisting of a ring or netted wheel.

(4) Racket. A game of tossing a ball through the air toward a goal with a racket.

(5) Shinny. A game of striking a ball with a club toward a goal.

(6) Snowsnake. A game of sliding javelins or darts upon the ice, hard snow, or ground to see which will go farthest.

Results

Five general motives resulted from the research; they were: gambling, amusement-diversion, ceremonial observance, increase of physical powers, and development of moral attributes. Regarding these motives, the following results are indicated:

(1) Gambling was a highly significant motive of the North American Indian for holding all athletic games.

From a total of ninety-nine (99) verifying references, gambling was listed as a motive for athletic games in eighty-two (82) instances. The number of times the next highest rated motive was listed was eighteen (18).

(2) Common forms of gambling consisted of the wagering of stakes unrelated to the game and the wagering of game implements.

Articles wagered included almost every article of manufacture or trade and were of considerable value. At times the combined value of wagered articles exceeded one thousand dollars. Items of clothing included leggings, moccasins, headdresses, beadwork, buffalo and beaver robes, and worked garters. Decorative items included necklaces, earrings, shells, feathers and vermillion. Shields, bows, arrows, and knife scabbards were wagered. Pipes, dishes, bowls, and awls also. Ponies were wagered and in former times, women and children.

When gambling consisted of the wagering of game implements, the winning antagonists received the actual game implements of the losers. Arrows, darts, javelins and poles were the game implements wagered.

(3) In the ball games--racket, shinny, and doubleball--gambling consisted exclusively of wagering stakes.

Racket essentially was a men's game and shinny and doubleball essentially were women's games. Both men and women wagered high stakes on the ball games.

(4) The wagering of game implements was most closely associated with the game of archery.

(5) Both forms of gambling, wagering of game implements and wagering of stakes, were found in the snowsnake and hoop and pole games.

(6) Minor motives of the North American Indian in playing athletic games were (1) amusement or diversion and (2) ceremonial observance.

The diversion pastime motive was cited in seventeen (17) instances of the ninety-nine (99) references and the ceremonial observance motive was cited in eighteen (18) instances.

(7) The diversion-amusement-pastime motive was most evident in the game of snowsnake and was present in archery, doubleball, hoop and pole, and racket.

(8) The game of shinny lacked diversionary motive.

(9) Ceremonial motives existed for archery, doubleball, hoop and pole, racket, and shinny, that is, all games except snowsnake.

The hoop and pole game manifested the ceremonial motive to a higher degree than the other cited games. The most common ceremonial purpose for holding a hoop and pole game was to secure luck and celebrate success in calling and hunting the buffalo. In general, archery, doubleball, hoop and pole, racket, and/or shinny were held as public games, in early times, to ensure luck and success in the harvest, hunt, and war; to keep sickness away and to promote healing; and to entertain at public occasions, feasts, and festivities.

(11) Insignificant as motives for playing athletic games by North American Indians were (1) increase of physical powers and (2) development of moral attributes.

Racket was the only North American Indian game of the six included in the study which was played for the purpose of developing the physical and moral attributes of strength, endurance, and courage.

Conclusion

Based upon the accounts from which the data were drawn; it seems to be all but impossible to overstate the importance of gambling as a motive of the North American Indian for holding athletic games. All other motives were of minor or insignificant importance. The North American Indian games of archery, snow-snakes, hoop and pole, racket, shinny and doubleball all had as their preeminent motive the practice of gambling.